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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001081

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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SUBJECT: LEGAL OPPOSITION LACKS POLITICAL SKILLS, PUBLIC SUPPORT, BUT ISLAMISTS ARE NOT THE ANSWER

REF: TUNIS 981

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson for reasons  
1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary. Although results of the May 8 local elections showed a ten per cent gain in the number of municipal seats held by Tunisian opposition parties, none of these parties, either alone or in a coalition, have any significant, measurable amount of public support. In discussions during a series of meetings and lunches the Ambassador held with opposition party members in the past several weeks, it was clear that while opposition sentiment exists in Tunisia, it is not translated into the political arena. Effective tactics employed by the ruling RCD party to limit opposition activity are certainly part of the problem, and party members offered several examples of these. But it is also true that the opposition parties in Tunisia remain deficient on at least three counts: Lack of a clear ideology, lack of platform, and lack of organization and political expertise. As in other Arab states, Islamists probably retain the best organizational and ideological pull politically, but few middle-class Tunisians are eager to see their return to the scene. Developing the traditions and institutions of true political activity will be key to promoting reform in Tunisia. End Summary.

Small opposition gains --but what does it mean?  
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12. (C) Official election results show a ten per cent increase in opposition presence on municipal councils since the last local elections in 2000. The so-called "loyal" opposition (MDS, PUP, UDU, PSDL) who are generally supportive of President Ben Ali and the RCD, ran in more municipalities than in 2000 and won six per cent of the seats (268 out of 4,366 total). But according to opposition party members, government authorities continued to maneuver to limit opposition participation. For example, the Ministry of Interior, (responsible for administering municipal elections), validated all lists of candidates submitted by the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) but rejected 25 per cent of Social Democratic Movement (MDS) lists, a third of Popular Unity Party (PUP), United Democratic Union (UDU), and Liberal Social Democratic Party (PSDL) lists. The Ministry rejected all of the "independent" opposition lists--i.e. Et-Tajdid (ET) and Democratic Progressive Party (PDP) and Democratic Forum for Work and Liberty (FTDL).

13. (C) An independent source provided Poloff with additional, credible examples of other tactics allegedly employed by authorities during the campaign, such as: An independent candidate being detained by security police and held until he agreed to withdraw his name, thus invalidating the entire party slate; reports that another candidate went into hiding until after the end of the election to avoid pressure from ruling party members; a report that in Sousse, a Ministry of Interior official refused to accept an independent list until the governor was present. The governor arrived four minutes after the deadline for submitting lists and the official rejected it.

14. (C) These tactics by authorities without a doubt act to limit the success of opposition parties, who never gain more than the 20 percent of the seats reserved for them by law. But the success of political opposition here is stymied by other factors as well. In a series of pre-election meetings the Ambassador held with opposition party leaders, we offered party representatives not only an opportunity to air their grievances with the system, but a chance to describe their platform and approach to the electoral campaign. Party leaders tended to be older, European-educated, and well-spoken advocates of human rights. Lacking, however, were basic elements of the party as an institution. We were struck by their inability to articulate an ideology, put forward a credible party platform, broaden membership, communicate a message, or conduct outreach.

15. (C) The result is that none of the opposition parties has built a grassroots following separate from the ruling party. Indeed, it is the "loyal" opposition-- MDS, PUP, UDU, and PSDL -- all of which support President Ben Ali and accept dominance of the RCD, which make the most gains in Parliament

and locally, apparently by tacit agreement with the RCD leadership. Neither the loyal nor independent opposition offer much in the way of thoughtful criticism of the Tunisian internal situation, focusing mainly on RCD injustices and criticism of U.S. policy in the region. The independent parties often resort to boycotting elections in protest, which further limits their visibility and popular standing. The unregistered opposition parties, like the Tunisian Green Party and the Communist Workers Party (POCT), are more direct in their criticism of specific internal policies; however, they have even smaller popular support and are banned from participating in the electoral process. A telling sign of which direction the opposition is headed is the fact that, despite repeated Embassy requests, no opposition leader could introduce us to young members or the "youth wing" of his party.

Is there any room for non-secular opposition?  
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16. (C) Although Ben Ali effectively rid Tunisia of any remnants of the Islamic En-Nahdha party more than a decade ago, many agree that Islamists and former En-Nahdha sympathizers retain the organizational and ideological elements that gave the party its strength in the late 80s. (NB: In 1989, En-Nahdha as an independent party received 17 percent of the vote.) Tunisian law on association clearly bans the formation of political parties on the basis of religion, and there is no evidence that an Islamic party has re-emerged here, even underground. However, the concept of Islam as a popular, galvanizing force is slowly creeping back into Tunisia's political environment. A member of Et-Tajdid said he believed Islamists, possibly former En-Nahdha adherents, are currently active within Tunisia on the fringe of the opposition movement and are targeting mosque-going youth. This is not lost on the independent opposition, who while firmly secular and leftist in orientation, have reportedly reached out to Islamists, including former members of En-Nahdha to broaden their support. PDP Secretary General Chebbi told the Ambassador that he recently met with En-Nahdha officials outside of Tunisia, and ET Secretary General Harmel indicated he would not rule out some sort of accommodation with Islamists in order to bolster his party's activities. Nonetheless, echoing comments we hear from GOT officials, including Ben Ali, Chebbi and Harmel were wary of U.S. outreach to moderate Islamists in Iraq and elsewhere, and were critical about Shia political gains in Iraq.

COMMENT:

17. (C) There is no question that the Islamists as organized politically by En-Nahdha retain some attraction for a sector of Tunisians. En-Nahdha's stamp has never been thoroughly erased in some of the lower and lower-middle class neighborhoods throughout the country, and it is probably true that based on organization alone an Islamist party would likely do well in a freely contested election. But our conversations with middle class and certainly official Tunisians continue to show a wariness--even revulsion---at the prospect of allowing Islamists to return to the scene in Tunisia. Moderate political Islam has not been widely accepted as a concept here.

18. (C) How to move forward? As is often stated, Tunisia has many of the building blocks of a modern state and a working democracy: A homogeneous, mostly well-educated population, a good communication system, a clear division among governorates. The lack of political will by the leadership to allow true competitors into the ring is of course the main obstacle to democratic change in Tunisia. But personality-based opposition parties who present no clear alternative to the RCD do little to help matters. Until the political decision is made to share power, it will be important to focus our reform efforts on developing the traditions and institutions of basic political/civil society activity to the fullest extent possible, while continuing to monitor and press for greater freedom of speech and expression. One problem will be convincing opposition parties of the need for their own professional development; while all could benefit from IRI, NDI, and Freedom House programs, for example, none expressed great interest in party training as described by former Assistant Secretary Craner.

19. (C) A possible vehicle, or future local partner could be a proposed "Arab Partnership Democracy Center," discussed in Tunis in April by representatives from human rights organizations from Tunisia, Qatar, Yemen, Algeria, and Iraq. As described by the Tunisian regional representative for Freedom House, Mohsen Marzouk, the Center would be regional and would seek to develop "capacity and expertise" in democratic practices, encourage dialogue between political decisionmakers and civil society, and "disseminate the culture and practice of democracy." As of now, the Arab Institute for Human Rights (IADH) in Tunis and the Human Rights Committee of Qatar have agreed to help establish the Center.

